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AUTHOR Young, Art
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ABSTRACT

Connections between stereotypical attitudes toward English studies and the apparent lack of integration in curricula and pedagogies make it useful to examine the "process/content debate." Representative voices in this debate have been strident: cultural literacy is paraphrased as expressing that it is not important what can be known, as long as the same thing is known by all, and process pedagogy is said to proclaim that what is learned is not important, as long as how to learn it is known. In the field of English, process is associated with writing and content is associated with literature. However, process and content are extremely important in the teaching of literature and the teaching of writing. Process means establishing a context in the classroom in which learning and communication can occur, one which focuses on how to read student writing and how to listen to student voices. Content is literature, defined as broadly as possible to include traditional genres, non-fiction prose, theories, practices, classics from the canon and works by women and minorities. For a coherent general education program in English, the ideal involves the integration in all courses of process and content, writing and literature. (MS)

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WRITING, LITERATURE, AND GENERAL EDUCATION

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Art Young, Department of English,
Clemson University, Clemson, SC 29634
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As I reflect on our session's topic: "The Critical Years: Ideals and Realities in Freshman and Sophomore English," three recent personal experiences come to mind which I would like to share with you. I believe these stories fall under the "realities" factor in our equation. Their recounting will serve to lead me into a discussion of ideals.

Story 1. Last spring, when Joe Flora called to invite me to this panel, I was engaged in serving as an external evaluator to an English Department in a middling-size, public, midwestern college. I had just returned from an on-site visit, and I was trying to make sense of what I had found. The Dean and the Department were at odds on almost every conceivable issue: hiring, program development, teaching loads, even scheduling of classes. However, there was a central issue that caused most of the contentiousness, one that is familiar to us, and which we usually label something like "the literature versus writing split" within English departments and within colleges. The department viewed its primary responsibility to be the teaching and development of the

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literature program, including majors, minors, and English education students. The Dean believed that writing instruction should begin to play an important role in the department's development. Just about all the faculty were tenured, hired by this college a generation ago. The department had gone a dozen years without adding or replacing a single tenure-track position.

Recently, they had found themselves in the position to hire new faculty on tenure track. The department wanted to hire literature specialists to fill the gaps that had developed during the years of neglect. The Dean wanted them to hire writing specialists, in fact he would not approve any other hires.

The faculty taught 12 hour loads , 4 three-credit courses each semester. They had established a policy, dating back to headier days before the current Dean had arrived on the scene, that full-time faculty would have a teaching load consisting of 75% literature to 25% writing. With the emergence of writing requirements and writing courses as popular electives, the department had hired numerous adjunct faculty to teach most sections of writing. The administration paid these adjuncts $900 per three-credit course. Many adjuncts taught three courses per semester at an annual salary rate of $5,400. The Dean had mandated that all newly-hired full-time faculty would have a teaching load of 75% writing to 25% literature. 3

At this particular school, there was no coordination of the adjunct

faculty: each designed her, and in some cases his, own syllabus and taught first-year English, journalism, or technical writing in any way that she or he thought best. There was little connection between regular and adjunct faculty, most did not even know each other. Many of the adjuncts taught night courses or taught on location at a shopping mall or military base, and because they were paid so little, they were not expected to attend meetings or keep regular office hours. And they didn't. No wonder faculty at this college looked bewildered when I asked them for the connections between the first-year writing courses and the sophomore literature surveys.

Story 2. My second narrative is an attempt to look at our educational system from the point of view of a student--the kind of student who enrolls in our frequently required first and second year courses. The student is usually a non-major, often majoring outside the liberal arts, is career-oriented, and as Allan Bloom tells us, has an impoverished soul. I am currently doing a series of ethnographies on such students--engineering students who are required to take sophomore humanities courses in literature, history, philosophy, and the like. This particular student enrolled in an art history class, but her attitudes toward sophomore literature were similar.

In many ways Theresa was a typical Tech student. She was a junior majoring in Electrical Engineering with a good grade point average.

Intelligent, with a record of past school success, Theresa nevertheless denigrated her thinking ("I'm just not deep enough") and writing ("I'm a pretty horrible writer actually") abilities. She knew she was good at memorization of facts and formulas and at filling out objective or short answer tests. She didn't know anything about art ("Before this class I never looked at a painting.") and really didn't want to know anything about it, but her degree required a few humanities courses, and this one fit into her schedule. This course would be like other humanities courses: not really germane to her educational and career goals. "I honestly thought it would probably be easy," Theresa chuckled to the interviewer in response to the question on why she enrolled in the course. "I just looked down my whole list of approved HU's and thought "Art Appreciation"--this doesn't sound like it should be too tough. I don't really have any burning desire to learn about art or anything." There is an unwritten tradition at Tech that engineering students should not show much interest or spend a lot of time on humanities courses, time that could be better spent studying technical subjects or drinking beer at one of the local taverns. "Oh no, I never take HU's. I drop HU's. Almost every term I have one and I'll be like overloaded with credits, and I'll say, like, oh my God, I can't do this and so boom there goes my HU class. Isn't that terrible?" She might have imagined that Art History would be a traditional "memory" course where students sit in a large lecture hall with the lights turned low. They view a sequence of slides and copy down basic information. On exams, they identify these

same slides by artist, date, and title; they define terms and identify certain techniques or "schools of art." Theresa was good at such courses. "I guess I'm, basically an engineering-minded person. I like all these rules you know; formulas and me are tight."

Story 3. Recently I have been meeting with a group of engineering faculty seeking ways to collaborate on a coherent program to develop the communication abilities of undergraduate engineering students. These engineering faculty were agreed on one of the primary principles that informs most writing-across-the-curriculum programs--that student writing and speaking would be integrated into engineering content courses--courses in circuits, mechanics, and soils--in lab courses and in design courses. Their approach was unusual. In my experience, engineering faculty are among the most reluctant to adopt writing across the curriculum because of the "content" problem--that is, there simply is too much content to cover and therefore not enough time for students to talk or to write in any meaningful way. I looked forward, and continue to look forward, to the opportunity presented by our mutual enthusiasm.

However, as our discussions continued about the specifics of the program and the collaboration, my enthusiasm was checked by yet another reality. One engineering faculty member stated that he never intended to read any student writing as a part of the program. He thought that would be the English department's role. There would be no use in his reading his

student writing, because he didn't know how to grade grammar, and he wasn't interested learning to do so; also, he didn't have the time to read undergraduate writing, and he didn't think his graduate assistants did either. Other engineering faculty nodded their heads in sympathy. When I suggested that this is not exactly what I meant by collaboration, they were willing to compromise. English graduate students could grade the engineering papers instead of English faculty; English people could grade for grammar and structure and engineering graduate students could grade for content. And when I suggested that we really didn't want any part of separating process and content in such a way, they politely acquiesced, and went away and hired some tutors from the community to grade their students' grammar. In solving their problem in such a way, they, of course, acted like English departments do, like the English department in Story 1, they hired part-timers, adjuncts, and TA's to do the work they didn't want to do--and at slave wages.

Although a version of this story will be familiar to those of you who have worked in writing across the curriculum, it reminded me again of the image that we as a profession project to our colleagues in other disciplines. Where do they get their ideas about language and learning? Where do they get their understanding of what we do? Why are they so eager to separate the experience of learning from the expression of what has been learned? And aren't their perceptions similar to school boards and superintendents, standardized test makers, and state legislators? And

while I have not done any formal research on this question, I know that one experience that most of these people have in common, from engineers to superintendents, is that they took first and second-year English courses from us (and perhaps nothing else), and that they were taught high school English courses by teachers who model their courses and curricula after ours--especially in separating writing instruction from reading instruction and literature instruction from both. Where did they get their understanding of what we do? From experiencing our curricula and observing us in our classrooms.

So concludes my three reality stories. I think there are connections between the stereotypical attitudes toward English exhibited by the college dean, the student Theresa, and the engineering faculty, and the apparent lack of integration in our curricula and pedagogies. I would like to briefly discuss such a possibilty in the context of the current--what we might call--the "process/content debate" given national focus by E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, and most recently by Lynn Chenny's essay "American Memory." As you know, the voices on the various sides of this debate have been strident: cultural literacy is paraphrased as representing that it is not important what we know, as long as we all know the same thing, and process pedagogy is represented as proclaiming that what we learn is not important, as long as we know how to learn it. Lynn Chenny, writing about

the nation's schools, says that professional educationists "began to emphasize the process of learning rather than its content. Both are important, extremely important in the teaching of history and literature. But so much emphasis has been placed on process that content has been seriously neglected."

This is by now a familiar complaint, both sides accuse the other of ignoring the obvious. In English circles, process is associated with writing and content is associated with literature, and we set up our disciplinary metaphors as if each were in some kind of continual and inevitable tug-of-war for supremacy over the other. I will certainly join with Lynn Chenny and pull her side of the rope in opposition to the testing mania currently preoccupying the nation's schools (one school teacher in Texas recently told me of an objective test designed to see if students could demonstrate that they knew the five ways to revise their essays on MacBeth), but I want here to return to Chenny's obvious point that is often obscured in the midst of rope burns and mud slinging: that both process and content are extremely important in the teaching of literature, and I will add, in the teaching of writing. As I move toward the ideals of my conclusion, I want to talk briefly about the two combatants: process and content, as they apply to the development and expression of knowledge in the academy--particularly, in first and second year English courses.

Students, like Theresa, come to us (or are required to take our courses) for two educational reasons: the career-oriented one and the

liberal arts one. From the four general education courses they take in English (two semesters of first-year composition and two semesters of sophomore literature), they expect to learn skills which will enhance career opportunities and to learn content which will liberate and shape their lives. Because of the way we arrange the English general education program, they believe they will learn the enhancing job skills in the first year, and the best that has been known and thought in the second year. Many would just as soon take the first year and skip the second--they are willing to accept the consequences of a yuppie existence. And yet most of us believe that form and content cannot be separated so easily; that is, we believe that you can't express yourself like an educated person without being educated. The development of knowledge and the expression of that knowledge should be an interrelated, recursive process. This is a recurring shock to students and school boards looking for a short cut, hoping to demonstrate proficiency in language independent of knowing anything to say. And yet our curriculum tells students that we teach process and job skills in the first year, and content and liberal arts in the second. I suggest that we should be teaching only liberal arts courses--that both composition and literature are liberal arts--and that process and content should be central to all our teaching.

Now we all know that writing can be taught as a vocational skill, and we also know, though we don't often admit it, that literature can be and often is taught as a vocational skill as well, albeit leading to few

vocational opportunities. I recommend Lucille McCarthy's recent article to you on one college student writing across the curriculum. It is the lead article in the October 87 issue of RTE (Research in the Teaching of English). Her case study is about one student writing and learning over two years in three courses required of biology majors: Freshman Composition, Cell Biology, and Introduction to Poetry, a required sophomore literature course. Our interest here is in the first and second-year English courses. She concludes that from the student's point of view, there was absolutely no connection between the two courses, not even between the writing in the two courses, that "although the writing tasks in the three different classes were in many ways similar, Dave interpreted them as being totally different from each other and totally different from anything he had ever done before" (p. 243). In each case the student starts over, leaving what he has previously learned behind, in a new attempt to psych out the teacher. And the implication is, as this study reveals, that in his quest for academic survival, Dave may have indeed adopted the best strategy. This becomes clear when we realize that the first-year English teacher and the second-year English teacher in this study hold virtually no assumptions in common about language and learning, about critical reading and academic writing, about ways of developing knowledge and expressing that knowledge to others, about the context for teaching writing and literature. Dave interpreted the poetry class as a skill class in which the skill to be learned was to find the "true

meaning" of the poem and hope that the teacher agreed. Six weeks after the course had ended Dave could remember little about it, "because I have no need to remember it" (p. 254). The course had failed Dave in a vocational and a liberal arts sense; he valued neither the process nor the content.

By process I simply mean establishing a context in the classroom in which learning and communication can occur. In many of our classrooms, composition and literature alike, we do not nurture student/teacher communication, or student/student communication, or any genuine dialog--and for Ann Berthoff, among others, teaching is dialog. In fact, we often adopt practices which nurture student silence. We assign writing to students who do not want to write to be read by readers who don't want to read. If we don't want to take home seventy essays on Walt Whitman to grade, then we should not assign such essays. If writers cannot tell us something we don't already know, then we should not pretend that they can--a process which mocks that which we profess to teach. Likewise, we should not read as a seeker of error rather than a seeker of knowledge, for that encourages silence rather than dialog. We should not assign "writing writing," writing for which the purpose is to show someone you can write, not to make and communicte meaning. (Show me you can analyze a poem, using correct spelling and grammar, rather than let's argue about the poem's meaning). What our students learn from such exercises is not exactly what we had in mind; they learn that neither

writing nor literature are meaningful to them in the liberal arts context which we have provided. Our students need to know and experience literature in a way that makes language and literature meaningful, and to do that, I believe, they must have access to their personal language, to interested listeners and readers, and to a context in which knowledge and language development, including the language of academic discourse, is in continual negotitation with the individual's existing knowledge and the developing knowledge of the classroom community. For me at the present time, the issue of process is one which focuses on how to read student writing and how to listen to student voices. It is an issue for all English teachers, whether they teach writing or literature, or as the case with most of us, both.

The content for us is literature, and for me the definition should be as broad as possible. The study of literature includes texts, readers, contexts; it includes traditional genres and non-fiction prose; it includes theories and practices; it includes classics from the canon; and, even though Allan Bloom may blame feminism and black studies for our failed democracy, it includes works by women and minorities, the underrepresented in our democracy, the silenced ones in our conversations.

Many of us are concerned about the few numbers of minority students who choose to major in English, who go to graduate school in English, who join our faculties to teach English. Although this is a complex issue, I believe that one reason may be the way we at

predominately white institutions teach first and second year English courses, the only courses many of the college-enrolled minorities take with us, courses they may not find enabling and empowering.

Thus my ideal for first and second year English involves the integration in all courses of process and content, writing and literature. It means writing and reading for numerous purposes. It means reading a variety of imaginative and non-fiction texts by authors from different cultures, genders, races, taught by men and women who themselves represent the cultural diversity of our democracy, to students who represent that diversity as well. Some of the teachers may be part-time, but they make a fair wage and fully participate in the college community, and since the four courses are all of a piece, all part-time and full-time faculty are as likely to teach one course as another.

At most of our colleges, we have an opportunity not given to any other department on our campuses. We have been asked to teach three, four, and with the trend to advanced writing requirements, sometimes five courses required of all students as part of their general education program. We can teach them, as many do now, as distinctly different courses, distinguished by process and content, different in educational goals, separate entities taught by separate faculties. But we can also view them as a coherent general education program in English for all college students which together form the liberal arts base for an education in science, technology, business, or the humanities.

A comprehensive approach to these general education courses would provide us with a context from which to reexamine the English major, graduate education, and English education. Phyllis Franklin in the Fall 87 MLA Newsletter reports that participants at the English Coalition Conference this past summer agreed upon "the importance of linking the study of writing and the study of literature at all levels" (p.5). This "linking" of writing and literature, in theory and in practice, can be the source of further linking to general education, to English programs, to other disciplines, to the schools, to our communities.